



COVER SHEET

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*Since its premiere at the 2000 Out of the Box Festival, Kite and Kooemba Jdarra's **Binni's Backyard** has performed to hundreds of Australian children, in theatres and community venues from the Torres Strait to Melbourne and through regional Western Australia to Perth. With the plan to take it to an Indigenous festival and into communities in Canada in 2006, it seems timely to examine Kite's track record as far as addressing Indigenous content and issues in its work for Early Childhood.*

Theatre-in-Education (TIE) is acknowledged to have started as a separate art form and educational activity at the Coventry Belgrade Theatre in 1965. A group of actors, teachers and social workers were brought together to create a community outreach team, to establish the Belgrade Theatre within the growing conurbation of Coventry. The late 1960s and 1970s saw the flowering of the participative form of the activity and the beginnings of its decline. It would be contentious to say that today TIE no longer exists, but it is accurate at least in that the term is now used as an umbrella definition for any theatre work that takes place in schools or has the intention of delivering an educational perspective in the broadest context. The educational nature of the work can be driven by an exposition of a performance form or by an excavation of a social issue.

TIE in the contemporary context embraces work done by professional actors (sometimes actor/teachers), predominantly in schools. Its primary aim is to use theatre and drama to create a wide range of learning opportunities across the whole curriculum. Usually these programmes involve participation and interaction with the audience. Typically, the programmes last for most of a half-day and include elements of performance, discussion, workshop and debate. They are supported by printed resource material and some training for participating teachers. Kite and Kooemba Jdarra's *Binni's Backyard* is a powerful reminder of TIE's role in the contemporary educational theatre landscape.

Ask any of the company members of *Binni's Backyard* about their most memorable performance experiences with the show and the answer is likely to involve a story of a community event (especially one with a feast); a performance on Moa Island in the Torres Strait attended by the whole population, a day of Indigenous celebration in Kuranda, or the show for over 700 local children, parents and Elders as part of the Cherbourg Centenary. The main common element however, is audience response. The most gratifying shows are those with the largest number of people who recognise their culture being represented onstage.

Not that *Binni's Backyard* doesn't have general audience appeal. Its ingredients are classic Kite fare for Early Childhood – a simple story told with humour, inspired music, beautiful visuals and plenty of opportunity for audience participation. It's also about a five-year-old girl caught up in the world of television, toys, fast food and computer games – familiar stuff for most contemporary kids and their parents in Australia today.

What is interesting and significant about the show's content is the way the story travels from the everyday here-and-now into the almost secret realm of the backyard, where there are relationships between the animals and the land, hierarchies and rituals to be observed and respected.

Kite's Artistic Director Tim Mullooly says, "This show works as a powerful experience for kids from all backgrounds but for Indigenous kids there's a whole other level of recognition and empowerment. What they're seeing out there are their stories, their humour and their people."

Kath Fisher, Stage Manager and Community Liaison person for the most recent season of *Binni's Backyard* has clear ideas about the value of the show, particularly for Indigenous kids.

"After each performance I asked the young audience if Binni learned anything from going outside and playing and some of the responses we got back were so perceptive, so observant. One little girl said, "Role models", because we had a black cast...also about the Spirit, learning about respect and responsibility and learning how to respect not only animals, but the environment."

Kath's conclusion was that the effectiveness of the show was largely because its educational content was inherent in the performance.

"In traditional ways education isn't separated from culture, from traditional learning; it is one and the same."

Content aside, on the simplest level the show has a powerful impact because of the strength of the performances from the young Indigenous cast members. These are young Aboriginal performers who are forging successful professional careers as actors and dancers. A teacher at Aurukun State School, Tyson Jones said, "Kids here have a limited understanding of Indigenousness from a national standpoint. It was good for them to see that there are different ways to be Aboriginal in different places – it shows that their options are not so limited."

What it all amounts to is this: stimulating and accessible educational theatre about Aboriginal culture in a contemporary setting, presented by a mixed race cast. And it seems to work well whether it's performed in the Cremorne Theatre or in the undercover play area at Yarrabah community.

"*Binni's Backyard* is really the final work in a trilogy," Tim Mullooly continues. "The first installment was *Legend* which was produced for the Queensland Performing Arts Trust (now QPAC) in 1990. This was before an Indigenous performing arts company existed and so it was an attempt to make a collaborative work between QPAT and the Indigenous arts community. Kite got the gig because of our Early Childhood specialty and because we'd been interested in producing a work like this for some time."

Legend involved Indigenous actors Ros Watson, Graham Brady and Raymond Walker, with Vincent Brady as cultural consultant. It was a production with a relatively large cast and high production values and was the show that Kite's 'promenade' style* developed from. Most significant however, was the beginning of an impetus to represent contemporary Murri culture. Consultation with Elders and community members such as Jackie Huggins revealed that there was a general perception amongst Murris that the Indigenous population was over-represented in traditional ways and that there was a need to show that the culture had survived and adapted into contemporary society.

Accordingly, *Legend*'s successor *Murri Time* is very much about the modern urban Indigenous experience and a celebration of its connection to traditional culture. The

audience is enrolled as members of five family groups and follow the journey of a young Brisbane Murri girl, Binnawee Bunya, her unforgettable dog Deefa and her helpful friend Peter Parker as they search for Binni's Gran (who went to the shop for bread, but has been gone a long time). With the assistance of a little bird, the wind and various other characters, Binni's awareness of her Aboriginal identity grows as she makes connections with family, names and respect for the land. Peter, a non-Aboriginal boy, meanwhile learns that there are many similarities and some intriguing differences between his culture and the contemporary Aboriginal one. Gran is finally found in Musgrave Park (a traditional Brisbane 'sit-down' place) where her clan has gathered to celebrate the Bunya Festival. The audience 'families' are welcomed and invited to join in the celebrations – a very memorable sausage sizzle.

Following its Out of the Box success in 1994, *Murri Time* went on to play throughout Queensland and South Australia and then to remote Aboriginal communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Tim Mullooly says of the tour, "It was amazing to enter some of those communities where life is pretty hard and perform a play which is not only a lot of fun but says relevant things about being Aboriginal in contemporary Australia."

Binni's Backyard began as a collaboration between the same stakeholders, Kite and QPAC, but is significant in the involvement of Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts, Brisbane's first professional Indigenous performing arts company. Important for Education Queensland's Kite Theatre as educators, is the depth of understanding and communication that has grown alongside the collaboration – a depth that is reflected in the strength of the relationship between the companies and the substantial nature of the content being addressed.

Like its predecessors, the story of *Binni's Backyard* is also about a journey, but an inner one. When the play begins, Binni is very much an indoor girl, used to passive entertainment and material goods. Forced by her parents to do something other than watch endless TV, an angry Binni packs her bag, grabs her teddy and runs away...to her own backyard. Her journey is to move from being bored and fearful of the natural world to an understanding and respect for the land, trees and spirit of her backyard through the agency of the animals she meets as well as the Spirit itself.

Through the recognition of Aboriginal spirituality in an urban context, the entire young audience is encouraged to think about their attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world as well as to celebrate their place in it. Tim Mullooly notes, "When we did *Murri Time* the issue of Reconciliation was very much at the fore-front, but our business is with young kids of all backgrounds. So our focus was always a celebration of the reconciliation process, in that the concept and form of the show overtly supported reconciliation in practice, rather than just in theory."

"Both Kooemba and Kite have a strong sense that what we're doing is contributing to a united sense of culture," Mullooly said. "This is not simply a reconciliation gesture, but a multi-faceted perspective on who we are."

- **Jane Carpenter* and Sandra Gattenhof**

*Jane Carpenter is currently Kite Theatre's Publicity and Projects Officer.